Politics 108
Making Sense of Politics:
An Introduction to Political Inquiry

Fall 2012 Oberlin College

Instructor: Christopher DeSante, Ph.D.
King Building Room 243  T/R 9:30-10:50am

Instructor Information:

Instructor: Christopher DeSante, Ph.D.
Office Hours: Rice Hall, Room 14, T/R 11:00am – 1:00pm, and by appointment.
Phone: 440-775-6339   e-mail: cdesante@oberlin.edu

Course Description:

The main purpose of this course is to introduce students to the various methods for the scientific study of political phenomena. Beginning with some basic questions in the philosophy of science, the course moves from questions about empirical methods to their applications in the social sciences with particular attention to political science and the field of American Politics. As such, the course is designed to be a survey of modern research methods: tools that we use to ask and answer interesting questions. The principal goals of the course are two-fold. By the end of the semester, students should be able to read and understand complex research designs (both quantitative and qualitative) within the social sciences: to be active and critical consumers of research. Secondly, students should be ready and able to conduct research on a topic of their choice.

With that said, this course will probably be much more “hands on” than other politics courses you have taken. Most classes will be split up into lecture and discussion with an added practicum component. Similar to a lab in the natural sciences, we will use this time to develop the necessary skills to conduct research. As a result, small discussions, presentations and peer-review will comprise a large portion of our time together in class.
Required Texts

This course has three required texts, available for purchase at the bookstore as well as on the Internet.


Course Assignments:

The best advice I can give anyone in how to succeed in this course is to come to class every day, ready and willing to ask questions about and discuss the assigned readings. There will be a good bit of reading to do, but I hope that you will all complete all assigned readings and bring good questions and comments to class. That being said, I'll briefly outline the assignments you'll be asked to complete over the course of the semester.

This course culminates with your completion of an 10–12 page paper¹ that lays out your design of a single scientific research project. To be clear, this is not a paper that requires you to perform new research in order to receive a good grade (though some students might). Instead, it is an opportunity for you to engage some debate in the relevant literature and develop the tools to participate in a scholarly dialogue. The choice of the topic is completely up to you: the learning should be in the process not only in the final product. To aid you in moving your research agenda along, most of the assignments in the course are designed so that you get feedback on your ideas from everyone in the class as we go. Thus, the assignments described below serve the purpose of making your final papers as good as they can be while simultaneously encouraging your own research.

Grading:

Grades in this course will be determined by the weighted average of the following items:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lit. Review Paper</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>October 2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>October 18th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>October 30th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Paper</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>November 6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper Draft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>November 15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>December 13th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>December 20th 9:00 - 11:00 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class/Practicum Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>T/R 9:30-10:50am</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹before you ask: double-spaced, one inch margins, 12pt Times New Roman, title page and bibliography do not count toward page count.
**Topic Summary:** A one page summary of the question you’d like to answer, how it fits within some literature, how you think you could go about answering it, and what difficulties you may anticipate in executing your design. This is due on September 27th, and is part of the practicum component of your grade.

**Literature Review:** Similar to an annotated bibliography, this will be a 1-2 page summary of relevant literature (with citations) of the core “debate” you wish to engage. This is due on October 11th.

**Presentation:** Each of you will give a 5 minute presentation of a question you’ve been thinking about in the social sciences. Ideally, it would be a question that has some link to politics (but this, as we will learn, is a very broad area). Those of you who worried about your topic selection should feel encouraged to meet with me during my office hours. Ideally this presentation would consist of four things: a central question/debate, your theory, some way you think you could test it, evidence you’d hope to collect, and any limitations in your design. Depending on your luck (or volunteers to go first), this will be on October 30th or November 1st.

**Response Paper:** Through some random assignment mechanism, I’ll assign each of you to provide a one page “response” paper to each of 2–3 students’ presentations. These should be thoughtful comments that accomplish two things: first, they would ideally address the weaknesses in the other students’ design (no design is ever perfect) but would secondly provide constructive criticism and advice for correcting the problems you see (you might also want to address the limitations of your suggestions). These are due November 8th.

**Paper Draft:** You will turn in a short write up of your presentation, incorporating the feedback you have received to address the question/theory/method you will use for your final research design. Ideally, this paper (or detailed outline) would be roughly 5 pages in length and incorporate the concepts we have learned up until that point in the semester. This is due on November 15th.

**Exams:** We will have two in class exams (a midterm and a final) that consist of approximately half a dozen identify/define/explain questions as well as a single long essay. In each section, you will have choice, and there will be no surprises. First is on October 18th, Final on December 20th.

**Final Paper:** An 10–12 page paper that incorporates all of the elements of a scientific research design and applies it to a question of your choice. The method you suggest to employ is up to you, but ideally you would be able to move forward with the research. In terms of a scholarly article, this paper would be everything from the literature review up to (but **NOT including**) the results and conclusion. Due December 13th.
**Class Participation:** Participating in class is easy; participating *well* is difficult. For each student there is an unknown optimum for how much they should speak in class. In most cases, the quality of your comments will matter more than the quantity of your participation. Good participation requires three things: coming to class, doing the reading before class, and having thoughtful questions and contributions about the concepts we discuss. In any case, come to class and do the reading. I have selected some readings that will be very challenging to get through. I do not expect everyone to absolutely understand every article/chapter. Instead, I hope that you come to class with questions that will help us all learn from each other.

**Numerical Grades**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A +</td>
<td>98–100</td>
<td>C +</td>
<td>78–79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93–97</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>73–77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A -</td>
<td>90–92</td>
<td>C -</td>
<td>70–72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B +</td>
<td>88–89</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>64–69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83–87</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>0–63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B -</td>
<td>80–82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Class objectives and policies:**

**Learning Objectives**

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Generate a scientific research question and identify a method appropriate to testing it;
- Be able to compare and contrast the major research methodologies in Political Science;
- More critically consume scientific research;
- Have a set of tools that allow you to begin asking and answering questions you find interesting.

I expect each student to be able to speak and write intelligently about the readings we cover. However, you should aspire to not only master the material but to go beyond it—drawing connections between articles/chapters and the philosophy of science readings; putting them in tension with each other; critiquing authors’ assumptions, theories, and empirical claims; and applying theories to new contexts such as current events. The course is structured to provide you with opportunities to do this in several different formats over the course of the semester.
Course Requirements and Expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned reading before each class. All readings are required unless otherwise noted. I reserve the right to use “pop quizzes” to measure both attendance and keeping up with the readings. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion and should keep their comments analytical and on topic.

Disabilities

Any student with a documented disability should see me immediately so that we can make reasonable accommodations.

Late Assignments

All assignments are due in hard copy form at the beginning of class, 9:30am local time. Handing an assignment in during class, after I have started class, will be docked one letter grade (10%). I will not grade work that is handed in after class has ended. If extenuating circumstances (severe illness, death of an immediate family member, etc.) make handing an assignment in on time impossible, please let me know as soon as possible, and before the due date, so that any special arrangements can be made.

The Honor Code and Plagiarism

Please see the College policy handbook for a definition of plagiarism. My understanding is that if you use someone’s words (or even just slightly alter them) without proper citation, you have plagiarized. Any work I suspect contains plagiarism will automatically receive a zero and will be reported to the appropriate College SHC committee. When in doubt, cite. Remember the adage: to steal from one person is plagiarism, to steal from a hundred is called research. With free citation software and the advent of Google Scholar, you really have no excuse not to properly cite authors.

Laptop/Phone Policy

As this is an applied practical research class, we will use laptops during a few of our classes. However, as studies show, laptops and wireless Internet connections have drastically increased the potential for distraction in the classroom. They distract not only the laptop user but also others around them. This is why an increasing number of faculty are banning them from the classroom, and with beneficial effects. One such study that I have read that documents these effects can be found here. Another can be found here on Psychology Today. What I ask then is laptop users try to sit in the back of the classroom so as to not distract those who are not using computers. Most times during the small group practicum sessions, I will ask that you put your computers away so as to engage with your fellow students. Put your phones on silent and away, please.
Course Overview:

The course is broken down into three main parts: philosophy of science, applied research sessions, and methods in modern Political Science. The first week I will give a sample research presentation: walking you all through a project that I have recently finished, from start to finish. We will then discuss basic issues in the philosophy of science (week 2), followed by an overview of methodology, topics in measurement, the qualitative/quantitative divide in political science, inference and causality before our first exam (week 7). After the break, we will pick up with student presentations, then cover game theory and institutionalism and its critics before discussing surveys and experiments. Finally, we will wrap up and review for the final.

Schedule of Topics:

Week 1: Hopes and Dreams

- September 4th: Introductions, etc.
  Introductions, Goals of the Course, talking about the syllabus, etc.
  Read: this syllabus, please.

- September 6th: How I Work... the research process in Political Science.
  Read: PSRM, chapters 1-2.
  Practicum: Sample Research Presentation

Week 2: Philosophy of Science

- September 11th: What do you wish to know?
  Read: Popper, Ziman, Machlup, & Hempel (IRPS, Chapters 1, 2, 8 & 11);
  Questions: What distinguishes science from non-science?
  How does politics differ from other majors?
  Can politics be thought of scientifically?
  Practicum: Deriving a testable question (small groups).

- September 13th:
  Question: Values and Objectivity in Science
  Read: Feyerabend, Kuhn & Hempel (IRPS, Chapters 3, 26 & 30);
  Practicum: Are the social sciences less objective than natural sciences?
  Does this matter?
Week 3: Modern Political Science

- September 18th:
  Read: KKV, Chapter 1.
  PSRM Chapter 3
  Practicum: Which methods might you want to use?

- September 20th:
  Question: how can we measure political phenomena?
  Read: PSRM Chapters 4–5
  Practicum: Finding academic sources and compiling citations/summaries.

Week 4: Measurement

- September 25th: Measurement II
  Question: how can we measure political phenomena II?
  Read: PSRM Chapter 8, KKV Chapters 4–5.
  Practicum: Annotated bibliography help...

- September 27th: Assignment Due: Topic Summary
  Measurement Difficult Concepts
  Sidanius et al. 1992, A Comparison of Symbolic Racism Theory and Social Dominance Theory, JSP
  Hetherington and Suhay 2011, Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans Support for the War on Terror, AJPS
  Practicum: Bring five copies of your paper into class. We will review them in small groups.

Week 5: Comparing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

- October 2nd:
  Quals and Quants
  Excerpts from Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science, 2005, ed. by Monroe.
October 4th:

George and Bennett, 2005, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Ch. 1

**Practicum**: What are the tradeoffs between qualitative and quantitative methods?

Week 6: Inference and Causality

- October 9th:
  
  **Question**: What are the threats to good inference?  
  
  **Read**: KKV Chapter 3.

- October 11th: Literature Review Paper Due Today!

  **Question**: When can we say X causes Y?  

  **Read**: Brady 2008, “Causation and Explanation in the Social Sciences” Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology. PSRM Chapter 6

  **Practicum**: Bring five copies of an **updated** project summary to class for small group peer-review.

Week 7: Midterm I

- October 16th: Midterm Review, Project Help and Research Presentation Demo

  **Questions**: bring them to class...  

  **Read**: your notes...

- October 18th: **IN-CLASS EXAM TODAY**

Week 8: Fall Break – No Class

Week 9: Presentations

- October 30th:

  **Student Presentations**: TBD – if using powerpoint, send me the presentation before 9am.

  Students names will be drawn out of a hat... students who go today will only be graded compared to others who went today.

- November 1st:

  **Student Presentations II**
Week 10: Game Theory and Its Applications – RESPONSE PAPERS DUE

- November 6th:
  Question: What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking in terms of games?
  Optional: Strategies and Games, Prajit K. Dutta, Chapter 1.
  Practicum: Game Theory on a College Campus

- November 8th: RESPONSE PAPERS DUE TODAY
  Question: What kinds of games do you play everyday? When?

Week 11: Thinking about Institutions – FIRST PAPER DUE THIS WEEK

- November 13th:
  Question: Why do rules matter?
  Read: Shepsle and Bonchek, Analyzing Politics, Chapters 3–4.

- November 15th: PAPER DUE TODAY
  Question: How do American political institutions affect both citizens and institutions?
  Read one of the following: Rohde 1979 – “Risk-Bearing and Progressive Ambition: The Case of Members of the United States House of Representatives”

Week 12: Applied Formal Theory and its Critics

- November 20th:
  Question: Why do Americans vote?

- November 22nd: No class today - Happy Thanksgiving!
Week 13: Survey Research and Political Behavior

- November 27th:
  
  **Question:** When are surveys good?

  **Read:** PSRM Chapters 7 & 10
  
  

  **Practicum:** Discussion about paper progress, pitfalls and questions.

- November 29th:
  
  **Question:** What can we learn from surveys?

  

Week 14: Experiments: Isolating Causality?

- December 4th:
  
  **Question:** What are the uses of lab experiments? What are their shortcomings?

  **Read:** DeSante 2012, “Working Twice As Hard...”

  **Practicum:** Criticizing scholarly work...

- December 6th:
  
  **Question:** What is a natural experiment?

  **Read:** Angrist 1990, Life-time Earnings and the Vietnam Era Draft Lottery
  

Week 15: Wrapping Up

- December 11th:
  
  **Question:** What can we do now?

  **Read:** Aldrich, Alt and Lupia 2007. The EITM Approach: Origins and Interpretations. *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*

- December 13th: Final Review **FINAL PAPER DUE TODAY**
  
  **Question:** do you feel comfortable moving forward with your research?

  **Practicum:** what would you change about your design..?